

SERMON OF SEPTEMBER 5, 2021

“MIRACLES AND THE MIRACLE”

Mark 7: 24-37; 1 Kings 13: 1-10

When Jesus worked miracles, people must have recalled miracles performed by “men of God” – prophets - in the history of Israel. Like the “man of God” in our reading this morning from *First Kings*, Jesus could exercise control over the physical condition of people. However, Jesus was unlike the “man of God” in our reading in an important way. The “man of God” in our reading from *First Kings* caused a hand of King Jeroboam to suddenly wither and then, Jeroboam having learned his lesson, restored the hand. Jesus took control of the physical condition of people in entirely positive ways. People who encountered Jesus may have recalled Elijah and Elisha, who, in addition to certain destructive miracles they performed, also performed dramatic health – and life-bestowing miracles. Healings performed by Jesus may have reminded people of the passage of Scripture in which Elijah’s restoration of the life of a poor widow’s son is recounted (*1 Kings 5: 1-14*). Jesus consistently worked miracles that restored health of life, or that gave people physical abilities Nature denied them from the beginning of their lives. You may recall that in the only destructive miracle Jesus performed the target at which he directed his power was the fig tree that he caused to wither when he cursed it to signify displeasure with a culture and a religious establishment that had failed to manifest true righteousness (*Mark 11: 12-21; Matthew 21: 18-22*).

For many people, Jesus’s performance of miracles gave evidence that the strange, itinerant rabbi from – of all places! – Nazareth was a “man of God,” a prophet. Jesus accepted this classification, it seemed. He frequently refers to himself as “the Son of Man,” a phrase used in Scripture, most especially in the *Book of Ezekiel*, to identify a prophet. In the *Gospel of Luke* Jesus seems to have accepted the classification of himself as a prophet when he says, as he sets out on the journey to Jerusalem and the Cross, “Today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem” (13:33). Like a prophet of former days, Jesus performed miracles that manifested the presence of the Living God. When the prophet in our reading this morning from *First Kings* comes to the Northern Kingdom of Israel from the Southern Kingdom to demonstrate God’s condemnation of Jeroboam’s worshiping Canaanite gods, the prophet, the “man of God”, acts as God’s instrument. It was in this – acting as God’s instrument – that a prophet *was* a prophet; a prophet expressed God’s Will in what he did as well as in what he said. In the *Gospel of John*, Jesus presents a summary statement of his prophet’s identity to certain Pharisees who have challenged his authority: “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him” (8: 27-29). The health – and life – bestowing miracles of Jesus – such as driving a demon out of the daughter of a Phoenician woman and providing a man of the region called the Decapolis with the ability to hear and speak, in our reading today from *Mark* – are in concert with Jesus’s positive message, the “good news” that “the Kingdom of God is near” (*Mark 1: 15*). God expresses, through Jesus, the desire that humanity recover the relationship with Him that has seemed – for ages has seemed – lost. Nothing less than the Grace in which humanity once

lived – remembered as a Garden where human beings were in perfect harmony with Nature – is offered by God through Jesus.

But Jesus was more than a prophet. He expressed perfectly the Will of God because he was – and is – in perfect unity with God. Son of God as well as Son of Man, Jesus *embodies* God's Grace. To believe in the reality of the offer of recovery of Grace is to believe in Jesus, and to believe in Jesus is to believe in the reality of the offer of recovery Grace. Throughout the history of Israel, prophets had come and gone. The people of Israel had learned to rely upon prophets for their understanding of the Will of God. The Hebrew people had become the people of Nation Israel under the guidance of a man who could be described as a prophet. The *Book of Deuteronomy* memorializes Moses as such: "No prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did...miraculous signs and wonders" (34: 10-11). Because Jesus presented himself as a prophet, he could be heard. Understanding of his presence in the world could begin with the recognition of his as a prophet. Just as Jesus used parables in his teachings – with characters, scenes, and events drawn from every-day life – the Three-Personed God of All Creation presented the offer of Salvation to humanity in a place named Israel in terms that could supply at least the beginning of understanding for the people of the place named Israel, and, subsequently, for people beyond Israel. Jesus, as a prophet, as a Son of Man, came into the life of Israel; and as a prophet, as the son of a man, he would have to leave the life of Israel. Before that day, it was important (an understatement) that at least some people understand that he was more than a prophet.

The life of Jesus would have to be understood as a Divinely-determined necessity in a transformation of the relationship between God and humanity. We see have a reason that Jesus often asks those whom he has healed to keep secret the fact of his having worked a miracle in their lives. In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus tells the man to whom he has given hearing and speech and the group of people who know of the miracle that they should not talk openly about it. Ultimately, the good news that needs to be circulated is, not that there is a prophet with great healing power in Israel, but that the Kingdom of God is at hand – that God, in the Person of Jesus, has offered Mercy and Reconciliation to humanity.

In our gospel reading, Jesus exercises mastery over earthly spirits and Nature in driving a demon out of the daughter of a Syrian Phoenician woman, in the region of Tyre, which is north of Israel, and in his correcting the defective hearing and speech of a citizen of the region known as the Decapolis, which is east of Israel. But both cases, recipients of miracles are Gentiles. In both cases – in one, a mother; in the other a number of friends – loved ones of a helpless person request Jesus's attention because they have heard that Jesus, a Jew from Galilee, has miraculous healing power. They do not comprehend the divine nature of Jesus. But insofar as these Gentiles recognize Jesus's power and have, therefore, a kernel of faith, they are not different from the many people of Israel who have received and will receive health – and life – bestowing miracles from Jesus. What Jesus offers, he offers universally and inclusively. And what he offers is new, despite the similarity between his work and the work of prophets of previous generations. The power of Jesus to work health – and life – bestowing miracles signifies the re-creation of the world. Jesus presents himself, on encountering the Phoenician

woman, as a man of the God of Israel; when the woman in effect insists upon belief that the God of Israel can be her God as well, Jesus sends the demon out of her daughter. A new day is dawning. Old divisions and categories that have meant a great deal in human history are slipping away.

As C.S. Lewis and many others have pointed out, Jesus himself is the crowning miracle of miracles. Humanity did not earn the Grace of God (understatement); nevertheless, In Christ Jesus Grace was offered to the world. The embodiment. Of the Grace of God in Jesus was an unprecedented event. And what occurred about 2,000 years ago on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea suffices; until the end of Time, a recurrence is not to be expected. When Jesus died on the Cross, his career as a prophet ended. This may seem an absurd statement, but we should notice that the activities of his ministry do not continue after the Resurrection. Jesus doesn't present discourses to crowds of people, argue with Pharisees, or go about performing exorcisms and healings. Jesus, the prophet of Israel, is dead; but Jesus the Son of God, a Person of God, lives on. We might observe that the people Jesus healed and, in a couple of cases, brought back from death, all died. Jesus did not provide the miracle of Eternal Life in this world. But he did provide – and does provide – the miracle of an offer into the Kingdom of God. Spiritual health is available to humanity – to all who will accept it.